

# Montana GEAR UP

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education / Montana University System



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## Director's Message

Last month I had the opportunity to hear a couple of very motivational speakers talk about high performing schools. One of the speakers, Dr. Joseph Johnson, Jr., the Special Assistant to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Ohio, is working to design and implement a comprehensive strategy for closing the achievement gap in Ohio. While Ohio doesn't fit the same profile as Montana, his observations come from schools across the country, both rural and urban. He discussed the seven common themes he found in high achieving schools and I want to share them with you:

### 1. *There is a deliberate, strong focus on getting ALL children to academically succeed.*

In high performing schools there is clarity of goals – a strong common message from teachers (and students) in the school. The academic achievement goals in high performing schools are substantially higher than other schools with common demographics. As Dr. Johnson said, "You can't get people to go whole hog for ho-hum." An atmosphere of excitement must be created. Teachers and staff come to work knowing they are changing students' lives. There is a continual assessment of programs. In other words, goals are broken down so everyone knows what needs to be done **today** to meet the goals. High performing schools don't wait till the end of the year to see how things turned out as they constantly assess where they are.

### 2. *There is a no excuses attitude.* All too often excuses are given rather than looking at the quality of instruction. A 'we can do this' attitude is needed. High expectations for students are a part of this but the key is teachers and staffs have higher expectations for themselves. They create an environment where students do succeed.

### 3. *There is a willingness to adapt structure as needed.* According to Dr. Johnson a core problem with teacher education programs is most instruct future teachers how to teach 'the Beav.' (For those of you unfamiliar with 'the Beav,' he is Beaver Cleaver from the fifties TV program 'Leave it to Beaver.' He is a white student from a middle-class two-parent family.) Educators have a choice to blame students for not being successful in programs designed for 'the Beav' or they can adapt for what works for their students. They look for a way to take the concept/idea and adapt it so their students will understand it.

### 4. *The schools involve everybody.* They constantly reach out to everyone – all teachers, staff, coaches, parents, and community – as they can't afford to waste any talents. There is

an urgency that all talents are important and must be utilized. (See the article on parental involvement elsewhere in this newsletter for some ways this can be done.)

5. *There is a sense of family, not a sense of being in an institution.* Students feel they belong and there is a strong sense of caring. Differences are celebrated, not simply tolerated. There are clear, strong expectations for behavior with clear, strong consequences for misbehavior. The consequences for misbehavior are delivered without emotion and there are few discipline problems.
6. *There is collaboration and trust in a high performing school.* Teachers are constantly building off of each other's successes. At low performing schools teachers are more apt to go solo and great teachers are a secret.
7. *There is a passion for improvement.* That passion is felt when entering the school. Teachers, staff and students are determined to succeed. Rather than using the 'chicken-feeding model' they are deliberate and passionate in their instruction. The 'chicken-feeding model' is tossing the feed to the chickens. If they get it, fine. If they don't get it, fine. The chickens are fed and the work is done. In a high performing school they aren't done until students have learned and there is evidence of it. Understanding this is a mission – not a mission statement – but a mission of the heart.

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## **GEAR UP Scholarships Update:**

### **Achievement Grants**

For the second year, 11<sup>th</sup> grade students who are members of the GEAR UP cohort group were invited to submit applications for the Achievement Grant. To be eligible, these cohort students have to be on track to complete the college preparatory requirements and have a 2.00 or higher GPA.

In the first year, 2002/2003, seventy-seven students each received the \$1,000 grant. They were primarily funded by the Student Assistance Foundation (SAF) along with contributions from the Montana Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (MASFAA). This year, two hundred nineteen 11<sup>th</sup> graders applied. The applications are currently being reviewed and the awards will be announced by December 22.

### **Essay Contest**

Montana Guaranteed Student Loan Program is pleased to announce that it will again be sponsoring the GEAR UP Essay Contest. The guidelines and questions will be announced on December 15<sup>th</sup>. Information on both grants will be sent by the grant managers as soon as it is available.

### **GEARUP Scholarship**

Last spring an announcement was made regarding a four or five year renewable scholarship with a total value of \$20,000. Criteria are being finalized and the application process will be in place in early 2004.

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## **Strategies for involving parents in GEAR UP**

Last month at the Southeast Regional Conference of GEAR UP several sessions focused or at least touched upon how to increase parental involvement in their children's education and GEAR UP. The following suggestions are not meant to be all-inclusive but some ideas for schools to try if you haven't already done so.

- Offer food and prizes at events for parents to attend.
- Also offer babysitting at events for parents.
- Mail invitations for GEAR UP events to the parents rather than sending the information home with the students.
- Take programs to the community. For many parents their schooling was not a good experience. It didn't represent a success for them so many assume the same is true for their children. It shouldn't be assumed that parents can push away their negative feelings about school and want to participate in their children's education. However, schools can take their programs to other community events and connect with parents in that arena.
- Take GEAR UP to the home. In some schools the principal and a teacher go to several homes each week to thank the parents for sending their child to the school. At some point in the conversation the parent often expresses they would like to help their child more (sometimes it takes a bit of discussion for the parents to come to this). During the conversation, the principal and teacher listen carefully to the parents to determine interests and/or skills that could be used to help teach kids. Then they make appropriate suggestions on how the parents could help. Even if the parents can't read, they can listen to students read and ask questions about the content. Although it is an investment of time by the principal and teachers to make the visits, the return can be well worth it in the participation and support that it generates from the parents. (This strategy was given as an example on how to involve everybody in a high performing school.)
- Recruit parent coordinators to help with activities for and by parents. Then give the needed training to the coordinators.
- Set up a parent center in the school. This is a place where parents can come and have access to resources that they need to support their children's education. It can also be a place where parent volunteer work is coordinated.

We would love to hear about successful strategies you have used to increase parental involvement in your school. Please share them with your grant manager or contact Sandy Merdinger.

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## The GEAR UP Spotlight

Enthusiastic reports have been received after last month's GEAR UP Spotlight. We have received some ideas for submissions in future newsletters. Next time you are on the phone with Everall or Peter during a monthly call, be sure to pass along a story from your school that we can include in the spotlight! It is a great way to brag about your students or program, and a way to generate ideas among other GEAR UP schools.

Remember, submissions are due by the 10th of the month. Check out this month's school in the spotlight below.



### BROWNING HIGH SCHOOL GIFT DRIVE

For the second year in a row the senior class is organizing a gift drive. Their goal is to raise \$2004 to be used to purchase and distribute gifts to at least 15 underprivileged families on the Blackfeet Reservation. Last year the senior class of 2003 raised \$2003 and were matched another \$2000. They were able to provide 15 families with gifts, clothing, and gift certificates to the local grocery store to buy Christmas dinner. Most of the money



## GEAR UP Spotlight: Browning

will come from the senior students and staff donations. The following seniors comprise the Gift Drive Committee and are pictured here, Karl Ingraham, Tiffany Polk, Javier Bustos, Heather Schildt, Wasewi Shawl, Mandi Henderson and Cole Ackerman. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication to pull this off in one month, but the students are excited and more than willing to do whatever it takes to meet their goal. The experience not only provides them with community service hours they need to fulfill their graduation requirement, but it also provides them with a sense of really giving back to their community.

## Save the dates! Upcoming Professional Development:

- Montana's Title I Conference & High Priority Schools Institute. February 23-25, 2004 Heritage Inn, Great Falls, MT; Registration information available online: <http://btc.montana.edu/outreach/title/>
- Montana Indian Education Association Annual Conference. April 1-4, 2004 Holiday Inn-Parkside, Missoula, MT.
- Families and Learning Conference. April 14-16, 2004 West Coast Colonial Hotel, Helena, MT
- Montana GEAR UP School Counseling Institute. May 6-7, 2004 Holiday Inn, Bozeman, MT



## Director's Message continued from page one

Dr. Johnson went on to say that it's all about accountability – not systems of accountability, but a sense of accountability. Every child is precious and should succeed. There isn't always district support for this model; sometimes the success at the school comes in spite of the district.

The first task in moving from a low performing school to a high performing school is to create a critical mass of teachers that get the message. A new culture gradually emerges in the school. Generally others either buy into the culture or leave because they are uncomfortable. At high performing

schools there is a diverse offering of extra-curricular activities but it is clear that instruction comes first.

As you can see, Dr. Johnson has much to say about high performing schools. His examples of schools that serve low-income communities but are high performing schools are very inspiring. I would love to engage more with you about Dr. Johnson's ideas and how we can see more of this happen in our GEAR UP schools. Best wishes to all of you during this holiday season.

## Advanced Placement Grants

The Office of Public Instruction is pleased and honored to have received one of just 22 Advanced Placement Incentive federal grants. While the strides made in 2000 through 2003 were impressive, we feel there is more we can do to help make advanced placement a permanent reality for Montana. Advanced placement priorities have changed somewhat under the Elementary and Secondary Education act, now called No Child Left Behind. For 2003-2006, there is more of an emphasis on providing AP assistance to low-income students and schools, and more of a focus on pre-AP programs consisting of teacher training and more challenging curriculum at the middle school level. In response, the Montana AP program will continue working closely with the GEAR UP program, increasing pre-AP professional development options, and making online pre-AP courses available. Additionally, the grant will fund an important initiative from the College Board called College Ed™, a 12-lesson program for seventh grade students to inspire them to attend and succeed in college. As before, the grant will increase professional development opportunities for teachers, counselors, and administrators, and provide online AP and pre-AP courses for students.

Long-range objectives of the grant include:

- For low-income students, a 50 percent increase in those students taking AP courses, a 40 percent increase in those taking the AP exams, and a 40 percent increase in exam scores of three or better.
- For American Indian students, a 40 percent increase in those students taking AP courses, a 30 percent increase in those taking the AP exams, and a 40 percent increase in AP exam scores of three or better.

Other objectives are to increase the number of AP courses offered in low-income, and in rural, isolated schools. Finally, while not necessarily a direct result of grant activities, we would expect to see a decrease in the dropout rate among American Indian students, and an increase in 8<sup>th</sup> grade achievement scores in core subjects in low-income schools served by the program.

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### December Reminders:

- Please note, the date has changed for the Montana GEAR UP School Counseling Institute from April 22-23 to May 6-7, 2004

- Surveys are due **December 23rd 2003** and are to be returned to:

**The Montana Small Schools Alliance.**  
**Attn.: Claudette Morton, Ed. D.**  
**Power Block, Suite 516**  
**Seven West Sixth Avenue**  
**Helena, MT 59601**



- The Mid-term progress and fiscal report forms are available on the web and due **January 31, 2004**
- It's easier to keep track of matching funds and document it as you go than to try to think back at the end of the year. Contact Kelly Hert if you have any questions about match.
- The Essay Contest questions and guidelines will be mailed out before Christmas
- Parental Involvement Seed Grant progress reports are due for those schools that have these grants.
- This newsletter is also available on the web! [www.gearup.montana.edu](http://www.gearup.montana.edu)
- Have a **great** holiday season!

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Montana GEAR UP website  
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Montana Guaranteed Student Loan website:  
<http://www.mgslp.state.mt.us/>

National GEAR UP website:  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/gearup/index.html>

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